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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000896

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [IR](#) [FR](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SENATOR SPECTER'S DEC. 29-31 VISIT  
TO DAMASCUS

Classified By: Classified by CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d  
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¶1. (C) Summary: Embassy Damascus looks forward to your visit. You will find President Asad and his regime more confident and self-assured since your meetings in December ¶2007. In the last year, Syria has successfully maintained and even deepened relationships with Iran, Hizballah, Hamas, and foreign fighters transiting the country en route to Iraq. At the same time, Asad announced in May Syria's participation in the first of four rounds of indirect peace talks with Israel, was one of President Sarkozy's guests of honor at the July Mediterranean Union conference in Paris, established formal diplomatic relations with Lebanon after Lebanese President Sleiman's August visit to Damascus, hosted President Sarkozy in September, and received UK FCO David Miliband in November. On December 14, despite EU concerns about human rights abuses and Syria's alleged noncompliance with its IAEA safeguards agreement, Syria and the EU initialed an updated version of Syria's 2004 EU Association Agreement, which now must be considered by the EU foreign ministers and eventually ratified by the EU's 27 member states. While most Syrians were thrilled by the election of Barak Obama, the Syrian regime remains hostile to the current administration and guardedly optimistic about the next. The Syrian Government demanded but received no U.S. apology or explanation for an alleged October 26 U.S. raid near the border town of Abu Kamal, which the Syrians contend killed only innocent civilians. In response, the SARG ordered the closure of the American School and the Embassy's Cultural Affairs Center. Your visit presents an opportunity to press Asad for concrete steps on a wide range of issues (see para 10) to signal Syria's desire for better relations to the incoming administration and new Congress. End Summary

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Israel and France Help Syria Erode Isolation  
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¶2. (C) Syria's central geographic location and its potential as a spoiler in the region continue to threaten Israel's security, Lebanon's fledgling democracy, and the emergence of a stable, democratic Iraqi government. Through dangerous liaisons with Iran, Hizballah, Hamas/PIJ/PFLP-GC, and former Iraqi regime elements and foreign fighters, Syria compensates for its relative political-economic-military weakness by supporting surrogate militias that it plays as cards to block U.S. regional initiatives.

¶3. (C) President Asad appears smugly confident that his regime's strategy -- maintaining ties to Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas while attracting European engagement with low-cost gestures toward Israel and Lebanon -- has worked to erode Syria's isolation and bolster the regime's prestige and

credibility. In the last nine months, Syria's participation in four rounds of indirect peace talks with Israel and commitment to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon convinced France, the UK, the EU, and others to re-engage Syria. As an incentive to Syria to adopt more constructive regional policies, President Sarkozy hosted Asad at Bastille Day celebrations in Paris (where Asad pointedly turned his back to avoid conversation with PM Olmert). After Lebanese President Sleiman and Asad formally agreed in August to restore diplomatic relations between their two countries, Sarkozy then traveled to Damascus in September. During Sarkozy's visit, Asad committed to exchanging ambassadors with Lebanon by year's end. As of mid-December, Asad has not yet fulfilled this commitment. Though Syria may yet meet the December 31 deadline, FM Muallim and others are suggesting that "bureaucratic and other" issues may "slightly delay" Syria's appointment of an ambassador.

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Syria Resists Calls for Gestures to New U.S. Administration  
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¶4. (C) For now, Syria has no real incentive to abandon its relations with Iran and non-state surrogates in the region, or even to show it is ready to make nice with the U.S. In recent visits, UK FCO David Miliband and Elysee advisor Claude Gueant urged Asad to take full advantage of Europe's opening to Syria by continuing negotiations with Israel, supporting Palestinian Authority President Abu Mazen, and signaling to the next U.S. administration Syria's desire for better relations. They urged concrete Syrian steps on

DAMASCUS 00000896 002 OF 004

foreign fighters, human rights, and ending the SARG's order to close the American School and Cultural Affairs Center that came in response to an alleged October 26 U.S. military attack near the border town of Abu Kamal.

¶5. (C) Bashar's regime has coolly fended off these suggestions, arguing Syria will not make nice with the current U.S. administration. Bashar has insisted that any further talks with Israel be conditioned on Israel's reply to a Syrian paper deposited with the Turks regarding the June 4, 1967 line of withdrawal from the Golan. The paper reportedly seeks Israel's views on six geographical points that include the shoreline of Lake Kinneret. We understand Israel has deposited its own paper with Turkey regarding its own demands concerning Syria's relations with Iran and Hizballah (to which Asad claims Syria has provided a response and deposited it with the Turks.) The Israeli government, however, appears unprepared to respond to Syria's points in the run-up to Israel's February 2009 national elections.

¶6. (S/NF) Regarding Iraq, Syria has maintained relations with former Iraqi regime elements and sought to deepen ties to Jaysh al-Mahdi leader Muqtada Sadr and Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council chief Abdul al-Hakim. At the same, Damascus has signaled to PM Maliki's government a desire to improve ties. During an early November visit by Iraqi FM Zebari, Damascus agreed to re-schedule a PM-level trip it had canceled in protest of the October 26 Abu Kamal incident and did not recall its recently-assigned Ambassador to Baghdad. Nonetheless, Syria remains an outspoken critic of the recently ratified SOFA/SFA, calling the accords "instruments to legitimize the illegal U.S. occupation of Iraq." Syria denies any collusion with foreign fighters transiting its territory en route to Iraq, even as senior security officials confide to UK and French counterparts that some FF facilitators mysteriously were released after being arrested.

While Damascus claims to visiting European leaders that it shares the West's view of extreme Islam as a common threat, Syrian operatives continue to facilitate foreign fighter transit into and operations in Iraq.

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¶17. (C) The European Commission, acting on the impetus of the French Presidency, resumed negotiations with Syria to revise Syria's 2004 Association Agreement in late November and sent a team to Damascus to initial the accord on December 14. We understand EU Foreign Ministers have yet to schedule a meeting to review the accord and sign it before submitting it to member states for ratification. Such a meeting will most probably occur after the Czech Republic assumes the EU presidency on January 1, 2009. Local diplomats tell us there remain some concerns about Syria's human rights record and Syria's lack of cooperation with the IAEA regarding Syria's alleged construction of a nuclear reactor at al-Kibar.

¶18. (C) Syria allowed the IAEA to send an inspection team to examine the al-Kibar site in June. The team took soil and other samples, which yielded traces of enriched uranium. The Syrians adamantly claim Israeli bombs with depleted uranium account for this phenomenon, but the IAEA has sought follow-up visits to Damascus to clarify this and other evidence supporting U.S. contentions that al-Kibar was a nuclear reactor. The November 28 IAEA Board of Governors meeting ended up discounting a report raising questions about Syria's nuclear program but calling on Syria to cooperate with the IAEA in resolving outstanding questions. Syria thus far refuses any further inspections, but Syria remains on the IAEA Board of Governor's agenda.

¶19. (C) Syria's human rights record, also of concern to at least some EU members, remains abysmal. Syrian courts sentenced 12 leaders of the Damascus Declaration National Council to two-year terms in September. While granting an early release to economist and political reform advocate Aref Dalila, who was sentenced in 2001, Syrian courts rejected a petition on December 15 -- just one day after the Association Agreement's initialing ceremony -- to grant early release to prominent Syrian journalist Michel Kilo. Syria's security services launched a widespread crackdown earlier this year and rounded up hundreds of would-be activists, many of whom were Kurds. Meanwhile, severe overcrowding and mistreatment of prisoners at the maximum security Sedniya prison led to a prison riot and takeover and subsequent crackdown. Several

DAMASCUS 00000896 003 OF 004

guards were reportedly killed, along with prisoner fatalities estimated as high as 200-300. Another uprising occurred in mid-December, again the likely result of harsh conditions and perceived regime persecution of Syrian Islamists.

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#### Issues to Raise with Syrian Officials

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¶10. (C) We believe Asad and Syrian officials will be looking for your assessment of the next administration's Middle East agenda. Syria very much wants Washington to return an ambassador to Damascus, take a more active role in promoting regional peace initiatives, lift economic sanctions, acknowledge positive Syrian behavior in Lebanon and Iraq, and end the USG's public confrontation of Syrian policies. Your views of how Washington in general and the U.S. Congress in particular will frame Syria's aspirations will provide a level of sophisticated analysis that Syrian leaders generally lack. We would be grateful if you would consider raising points on several issues:

-- Foreign Fighters and October 26: Asad may raise the alleged October 26 U.S. raid at Abu Kamal. Based on press reports and information available in Washington, you can share your understanding that the target of this alleged raid was reportedly Abu Ghadiya, a facilitator who has operated in Syria for at least a year. Asad should know that American

military and diplomatic officials will remain concerned about Syria's turning of a blind eye (to put it most charitably) to the presence of such networks. These facilitators are responsible for attacks on U.S. troops and Iraqis. Syria's denials are not convincing, and its hopes for better relations with us and Iraq will not be realized until we see evidence of Syrian attempts to roll up these networks.

-- Supporting Lebanese Sovereignty: As of December 18, Syria has not yet fulfilled its pledge to exchange ambassadors with Lebanon. If Asad has not yet made good on his promise to Sarkozy by your meeting, you should press him on the importance of doing so. Not only does it send a signal about how serious Syria is about promoting regional stability; progress on improving bilateral relations will be viewed in Washington as one of several indicators about whether U.S. engagement can produce tangible results. You can also press Asad and Muallim on the importance of demarcating borders, supporting free and fair elections by not interfering, and continuing to deepen cordial relations with President Sleiman and the current Lebanese government (not just those in opposition to it.) You could also make the point that Congress and the next administration will expect Syria to cooperate fully with the International Lebanese Tribunal's proceedings regarding the assassinations of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri and over a dozen other Lebanese politicians and activists.

-- Indirect Peace talks with Israel. Now that it appears neither Syria nor Israel intend to resume indirect talks until after the February 2009 Israeli elections, you might ask Asad about what role he would like to see the U.S. play in advancing regional peace talks and what other countries he envisions joining the process. Syrian officials have hinted they would like the Obama Administration to play the role of honest broker in peace talks with Israel, but it is unclear whether that role includes direct mediation in addition to acting as a guarantor. You might also note continuing doubts in Washington and Israel about how seriously Syria desires peace and try to draw out Asad and Muallim on whether there is any flexibility to Syria's all-or-nothing position.

-- Syria's influence over Hamas and rejection groups: Syria's willingness to allow Hamas Politburo leader Khaled Mesha'al a platform to denounce the Palestinian Authority's negotiations with Israel undermines the PA's legitimacy. A recent Iranian-financed "Right of Return" Conference organized by Hamas brought 4,000 Palestinians and others to Damascus to denounce Israeli-PA peace negotiations. Hamas continues to reject extending a ceasefire in Gaza, which expired December 19. We suspect Asad and Muallim will defend their relationship with Hamas by pointing out Syria's dubious efforts to promote Palestinian reconciliation. You can present Congressional concerns about Hamas' destructive role in Gaza, its impact on upcoming Israeli elections, and the negative regional impact of a collapse in PA-Israeli peace

DAMASCUS 00000896 004 OF 004

talks.

-- Cooperating with the IAEA: The outcome of the November 28 IAEA Board of Governors meeting put Syria on notice that the international community expects Syrian cooperation. However, some officials here are reading the BOG's decision to move forward with technical cooperation as a sign that Syria can evade IAEA requests for further inspections. Since decisionmaking on this issue is limited to a small circle around President Asad, your meeting represents an opportunity to press him on the importance of cooperating fully with the IAEA.

-- A New Embassy Compound: Last year, you raised this subject with President Asad, who brushed it aside as a "technical administrative matter" that would be resolved in due course. For 10 years, the SARG has stymied our efforts to secure a Syrian commitment to identify suitable land and

permission to build a new embassy. Our current facility has zero setback, fails to meet Inman standards, and represents a host of security and safety challenges. In October, we met the MFA on this issue and the SARG showed us the same plans for a diplomatic enclave in which a new embassy might be built. These were the same plans shown to embassy officials two years and four earlier. You might suggest that Syria's positive response on this technical (not political) issue would help to favorably shape discussion on returning a U.S. ambassador.

-- Reopening the American Cultural Center (ACC): Though the ACC is "closed to the Syrian public," we continue to organize exchange programs (e.g., Fullbrighters and individual visitors), American speaker programs, and other cultural activities. The closure of the American Language Center, which was teaching English to some 2,000 Syrians annually, should be reversed. You might ask Asad and Muallim about their intentions to allow the Embassy to re-open the ALC, and when they expect it to happen.

-- The Damascus Community ("American") School: Unless the Syrian Government indicates a willingness to allow us to re-open the school in the coming week or two, the School Board will most probably have voted to put the school in prolonged closure by the time of your arrival. That means teachers and administrative staff will have officially been released from their contracts and received severance pay. Even if Asad were to reverse the SARG's decision on or shortly after January 20, the School would be not be able to reopen for the 2009 Spring term and probably would be hard pressed to open its doors by Fall 2009. Most of the school's Syrian students, who comprised more than half of the school's high school student body, have moved on to accredited boarding schools in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. Other diplomatic and UN missions are allowing affected parents to curtail. All of which is to say, DCS' student base will have shrunk considerably to the point where the school would probably not be financially viable unless the SARG allows Syrian students to enroll. We ask that if you raise this issue, you firmly inform Asad that it was a mistake to close the school. Restoring more normal diplomatic relations will require Syrian steps to allow a fully accredited school to teach a U.S.-based curriculum without harassment from the Ministry of Education.

CONNELLY